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MEADE'S GETTYSBURG CAMPAIGN:

The Operational Art of George Gordon Meade

AN INDIVIDUAL STUDY

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ABSTRACT

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This is a study of the actions taken by General Meade during the Gettysburg Campaign. It analyzes the decisions he made and what factors and information he had available upon which to base his decisions. The focus is on the operational level of war rather than on the tactics of the battle. Primary sources include the Official Records (after action reports and messages), Congressional Reports and the personal writings of participants.

## THE GETTYSBURG CAMPAIGN

The Battle of Gettysburg is one of the most written about engagements in U.S. military history. Yet for all the attention it has been given, some aspects remain virtually unknown. The role of General George Gordon Meade has been largely overlooked by historians. Instead of the victor, they have tended to focus on the vanquished -- Generals Lee, Longstreet and Pickett. Perhaps this fixation on the southern viewpoint results from a fascination with the romantic, for the ill-fated efforts of these tragic heroes is the stuff Hollywood movies are made of.

Today's renewed interest in the operational level of war makes it worthwhile to revisit the Battle of Gettysburg, this time paying close attention to the actions of Meade. Scrutiny of his campaign may still fail to reveal a man of great charisma and style such as that of Robert E. Lee, but there is no question that he successfully planned and executed a magnificent campaign under extremely difficult conditions.

No attempt is made here to define the operational level of war. Whether the reader considers it to be the movement of troops to battle, or that vague area between strategy and tactics, or merely all military action above corps level, it is all found in Meade's Gettysburg campaign.

For purposes here, the Gettysburg campaign is considered to begin with the Army of Virginia crossing the Potomac, through the battle itself and ending with Lee recrossing the Potomac -- 28 June to 14 July 1863. This insures that operational factors are considered as well as the purely tactical matters of the battle proper.

There are two additional advantages to looking at this particular time. First, we can see the difficulties Meade faced when he suddenly found himself unexpectedly in command of the Army of the Potomac at a time of crisis and how he handled the situation. Secondly, in this initial period of his command, he was as yet relatively naive as to the bitter politics which had brought down his predecessors. His actions were therefore more pure and not anchored in political self-preservation as were those of commanders before him, and his were to be in the future.

The reader should be forewarned that this is an effort to understand the generalship of Meade and not a definitive account of the battle. It attempts to analyse Meade's decisions in light of when they were made and what information was available to him at the time. Therefore, some portions of the battle are omitted or skimmed over as not important to understanding Meade's thought process. In some instances there are no sources stating what Meade may have considered during a given phase of the operation. In those cases I have made assumptions based on available facts, his previous behavior and what seems reasonable for a man of his experience.

Finally, as anyone reading on the subject knows, there are numerous conflicts in the various accounts. These fall into three categories: intentional lies to discredit some one or to alibi a failure, uninformed opinion, and honest mistakes due to the lapse of time. I have used my own judgment to resolve these rather than presenting them to the reader as an issue.

## THE MOVEMENT TO GETTYSBURG

At three o'clock in the morning of 28 June 1863, General George Gordon Meade, commander of V Corps of the Army of the Potomac, was awakened by a voice outside his tent inquiring as to his whereabouts (1). The voice was that of Colonel James A. Hardie, from the staff of General Halleck, General-in-Chief of the Army. The purpose of Hardie's call was to inform Meade that General Hooker, commander of the Army of the Potomac, had been relieved and that he, Meade, was appointed commander.

General Meade, accompanied by one aide and Colonel Hardie, departed camp immediately and rode to Army Headquarters to meet with Hooker. Meade said little on the trip and one can but wonder what he was thinking.(2) Any satisfaction he may have felt from this sudden promotion must surely have been tempered by some misgivings. General Eisenhower was uniquely qualified to understand the responsibility thrown on Meade and described it thus:

...command of the Army of the Potomac through a year and a half had been an avenue to military disgrace; Meade's appointment was only one in a long succession of changes in its chief leadership since McClellan took over two years earlier. To command it seemed to invite the enmity of all the politicians in Washington who knew exactly how the war should be conducted. The Army's commander was seldom permitted the luxury of devoting himself to purely military problems (3).

If this were not trouble enough, Meade found upon his meeting with Hooker that he had inherited command of an army adrift. The specific strength, location and intent of the enemy was generally unknown. The Army of the Potomac had no plan of action, at least none that was made known to the new commander.

He did, however, have clear guidance in the form of a letter from Halleck which had accompanied the order placing him in command.

You will receive with this the order of the President placing you in command of the Army of the Potomac. Considering the circumstances, no one ever received a more important command; and I cannot doubt that you will fully justify the confidence which the Government has reposed in you.

You will not be hampered by any minute instructions from these headquarters. Your army is free to act as you deem proper under the circumstances as they arise. You will, however, keep in view the important fact that the Army of the Potomac is the covering army of Washington, as well as the army of operation against the invading forces of the rebels. You will therefore manoeuvre and fight in such a manner as to cover the Capital

and also Baltimore, as far as circumstances will admit. Should General Lee move upon either of these places, it is expected that you will either anticipate him or arrive with him, so as to give him battle.

All forces within the sphere of your operations will be held subject to your orders.

Harper's Ferry and its garrison are under your direct orders.

You are authorized to remove from command and send from your army any officer or other person you may deem proper; and to appoint to command as you may deem expedient.

In fine, General, you are intrusted with all the power and authority which the President, the Secretary of War, or the General-in-Chief can confer on you, and you may rely on our full support.

You will keep me fully informed of all your movements and the positions of your own troops and those of the enemy, so far as you know.

I shall always be ready to advise and assist you to the utmost of my ability. (4)

Thus Meade, although still unsure of Lee's specific disposition and intent, had clear guidance upon which to begin formulating a concept of operation. Soon after his meeting with Hooker, Meade telegraphed Halleck that he intended to "move toward the Susquehanna, keeping Washington and Baltimore well covered, and if the enemy is checked in his attempt to cross the Susquehanna, or if he turns toward Baltimore, to give him battle." (5)

Information on Lee's movements flowed meagerly into Meade's headquarters in bits and pieces, much of it coming from the public press. Meade sifted through the data and judged, correctly, that Lee was marching up the Cumberland Valley. He decided he must move quickly if he was to keep between Lee and the cities of Washington and Baltimore per Halleck's instructions.

Meade deserves a great deal more credit than he has been given for the way he conducted the movement of the Army of the Potomac to Gettysburg. While basically a cautious man, Meade was willing to accept risk if the situation demanded. Although he had no hard evidence of Lee's movements and a premature reaction might have placed his army in danger, it was a greater risk to allow Lee to get too much of a head start while waiting for more information. Thus, only hours after assuming command, he issued orders moving his forces north.

Meade reduced the element of risk by thorough planning. He spread his forces laterally and constructed careful movement tables to enhance speed without sacrificing the ability to concentrate his forces in the event Lee fell upon him unexpectedly or he found Lee in a position where he could be attacked. Meade placed his headquarters centrally where he could best control the movement of the army.

The army will march tomorrow as follows:

4 a.m. The 1st Corps, Major General Reynolds, by Lewistown and Mechanicstown to Emmittsburg, keeping the left of the road from

Frederick to Lewistown, between J.P. Cramer's and where the road branches to Utica and Cregarstown, to enable the 11th Corps to march parallel to it.

4 a.m. The 11th Corps, Major General Howard, by Utica and Cregarstown to Emmittsburg.

4 a.m. The 12th Corps, by Ceresville, Walkersville and Woodsborough, to Taneytown.

4 a.m. The 2d Corps, by Johnsville, Liberty and Union, to Frizzleburg.

4 a.m. The 3d Corps, by Woodsborough and Middleburg (from Walkersville), to Taneytown.

The 5th Corps will follow the 2d Corps, moving at 8 a.m., camping at Union.

The 6th Corps, by roads to the right of the 5th and 2d Corps, to New Windsor.

The Reserve Artillery will precede the 12th Corps, at 4 a.m., and camp between Middleburg and Taneytown.

General Lockwood, with his command, will report to and march with the 12th Corps.

The Engineers and bridge-trains will follow the 5th Corps.

Headquarters will move at 8 a.m. and be to-morrow night at Middleburg. Headquarter's train will move by Ceresville and Woodsborough to Middleburg, at 8 a.m.

The cavalry will guard the right and left flanks and the rear, and give the Commanding General information of the movement and of the enemy in front.

Corps commanders and commanders of detached brigades will report by a staff officer their positions to-morrow night and on all marches in the future.

The corps moving on different lines will keep up communications from time to time, if necessary. They will camp in position, and guard their camps. Corps commanders will send out scouts in their front, as occasion offers, to bring in information. Strong exertions are required and must be made to prevent straggling.(6)

Additional strength was gained by delegating control of the left wing, that closest to Lee and therefore the most likely to become engaged on short notice, to Major General Reynolds. Reynolds had been given operational control of Sickles' III Corps and Howard's XI Corps before Meade assumed command, an arrangement Meade continued in making his plans. Considering Meade's later demonstrated willingness to delegate responsibility to subordinates, and his high regard for Reynolds, Meade would probably have established this same command structure himself had it not already been in place. At the least he should be given credit for recognizing and taking advantage of a situation which supported his concept of the operation.

The overall quality of this plan is remarkable considering that Meade had been in command for less than twentyfour hours and previously had commanded nothing larger than a corps. Further, we can safely assume that the thoroughness of the plan was a

result of Meade's skill rather than that of his staff since the Army of the Potomac had not previously demonstrated this ability under Hooker.

As events transpired, it was indeed the left wing which engaged Lee's army on the first day of the Battle of Gettysburg. The 1st Cavalry Division, commanded by Brigadier General John Buford, initially made contact with A.P. Hill's corps approaching Gettysburg from the west on the Chambersburg Pike. Buford established a defense and held valiantly against a numerically superior force until Reynolds brought his three corps into the battle.

The approach of enemy forces along the Chambersburg Pike was not a surprise to the Federals. Meade's cavalry screen had picked up an accelerating volume of indicators that Lee was turning toward Gettysburg. Buford knew by the evening of 30 June that it was Hill's corps approaching (7). He kept both the Cavalry Corps Commander, Major General Pleasanton, and Reynolds apprised of the situation as it developed (8). Thus when Buford elected to make his stand west of Gettysburg on the morning of 1 July, he was aware that the left wing of the Army of the Potomac was already moving rapidly in his direction and that its lead division, with Reynolds himself, was within three miles of his position (9).

Although Meade and Lee were both aware of the strategic importance of Gettysburg, neither initially had planned to do battle there. The inevitable clash could just as easily have taken place at Emmitsburg, York, Harrisburg or Pipe Creek. But as time passed the area of probable engagement narrowed to the Chambersburg-Gettysburg vicinity. Meade's son, who was on his staff at that time, described the situation well.

...although the movements of the two armies had acted and reacted on each other, they were then, from that time forth to the end, to influence each other reciprocally, with ever quicker and quicker impulse....As for the determination of the exact locality of the battlefield, if there were to be a battle, it did not depend upon the decision of either Meade or Lee, but upon many circumstances which each could modify, but could not altogether control; for besides the circumstances of ground and the disposition of troops, each general was by his action creating varying circumstances for the other. Not until the order came to march on Gettysburg, did circumstances proscribe to each exactly the same course.(10)

As late as the evening of 30 June, Meade was still not certain as to where the battle would occur but knew that Lee was concentrating his forces. This information came from Brigadier General Haupt, in charge of the Military Railway Department, and was relayed through Stanton, the Secretary of War.

Lee is falling back suddenly from the vicinity of Harrisburg, and concentrating all his forces. York has been evacuated. Carlisle is being evacuated. The concentration appears to be at or near Chambersburg. The object



apparently a sudden move against Meade, of which he should be advised by courier immediately.(11)

Meade directed his engineers to evaluate the surrounding area for suitable battle positions. He instructed General Humphreys, 2d Division, III Corps, and Reynolds to examine the Emmittsburg area for that purpose.(12) Humphreys was likely designated for this mission due to his proximity and Reynolds because of his duty as wing commander. It also demonstrates two traits of Meade's style of command -- delegation of important duties to trusted subordinates and a continuous search for information.

Meade prepared a contingency plan for occupying a defensive position along Pipe Creek, roughly southeast of Emmittsburg, if the situation dictated. The selection of this position was based on the examination he had ordered of the area. A circular identifying the tentative position was sent to each corps commander. This circular was cited later by Meade's critics as evidence that he was ready to retreat before the battle ever began. Such criticism fails to stand up when the situation is viewed as Meade saw it then, not as his critics saw it later with full knowledge of what transpired on both sides. Meade knew Lee was concentrating his army but he did not know where. Nor did he know if the rebel force was moving into a defensive position or preparing to attack. With unknowns of this magnitude we should expect a commander to have a contingency plan to cover a reversal rather than waiting until it was needed to develop it.

By the morning of 1 July, a crescendo of activity was developing. Reynolds was rushing the left wing to aid Buford at Gettysburg. Although as yet unsure of the intent of Lee's effort at Gettysburg, Meade warned his right flank to be prepared to support Reynolds or, if that failed, to withdraw to designated positions.

...it would appear from reports received, that the enemy is moving in heavy force on Gettysburg...and it is not improbable he will reach that place before the command under Major General Reynolds (the First and Eleventh Corps), now on the way, can arrive there. Should such be the case, and General Reynolds finds himself in the presence of a superior force, he is instructed to hold the enemy in check, and fall slowly back. If he is able to do this, the line indicated in the circular of to-day will be occupied to-night. Should circumstances render it necessary for the Commanding General to fight the enemy to-day, the troops are posted as follows for the support of Reynolds's command, viz.: On his right, at "Two Taverns", the Twelfth Corps; at Hanover, the Fifth Corps; the Second Corps is on the road between Tannytown and Gettysburg; the Third Corps is at Emmittsburg.

This information is conveyed to you, that you may have your Corps in readiness to move in such direction as may be required at a moment's notice.(13)



At approximately 1130 a.m. Meade received two messages which provided evidence that Gettysburg was probably to be the place of battle. Reynolds sent an aide to Meade, shortly after linking up with Buford, with word that the enemy was advancing in strong force and that he, Reynolds, would try to keep them from reaching the heights beyond the town (14). The heights Reynolds was trying to protect was Cemetery Hill but it is not known if anyone in Meade's headquarters recognized this fact. Soon thereafter a message came from Buford advising Meade that his cavalry was being pushed back rapidly.

The next information to reach Meade was a terrible blow. He was informed at one o'clock that Reynolds had fallen wounded or killed (15). He immediately ordered Major General Hancock, commander of II Corps, who fortuitously was near by, to turn over his command and to ride forward to assume Reynolds's command at Gettysburg.

The Major General Commanding has just been informed that General Reynolds has been killed or badly wounded. He directs that you turn over the command of your corps to General Gibbon; that you proceed to the front, and by virtue of this order, in case of the truth of General Reynolds's death, you assume command of the corps there assembled, viz., the Eleventh, First, and Third, at Emmitsburg. If you think the ground and position there a better one to fight a battle under existing circumstances, you will advise the General, and he will order all troops up. You know the General's views, and General Warren, who is fully aware of them, has gone out to see General Reynolds. (16)

There are several noteworthy things about this message. It was sent very soon after Meade learned Reynolds had been hit, perhaps within ten minutes. This is indication of a commander who could think and act clearly in trying moments. He had to place some one in whom he had confidence in command of the left wing quickly or risk loss of the high ground at Gettysburg. For some unknown reason, perhaps knowledge of past engagements, Meade evidently thought Reynolds's next in command, Doubleday, was not up to such responsibility and for Meade to have assumed control himself would have bogged him down in the tactical level when he was most needed operationally maneuvering his corps to the battle.

The message provides Hancock with a great deal of authority. Meade gives him the power to decide if Gettysburg is really where they should fight. It also gives Hancock as much information as Meade has on the situation, tells him what is expected of him and makes him aware that Warren, Meade's Chief of Engineers, will be available for consultation. All in all, a very clear and precise order.

Soon after placing Hancock in charge of the left wing, Meade ordered the remaining corps to move on Gettysburg. The stage was now set for the long awaited battle between the Army of the Potomac and the Army of Virginia.

## THE BATTLE OF GETTYSBURG

Meade arrived at Cemetery Hill at one o'clock in the morning of 2 July.(17) There he met the commanders of the corps already at Gettysburg and received their reports of the day's activities. He informed them that the remainder of the army was on the way and would be there by morning, then walked forward to an artillery position with a few of the officers so they could point out the general terrain features and troop positions. It was too dark to distinguish detail but the enemy's campfires could be seen in the distance.

At first light Meade inspected the Federal position. Beginning at Cemetery Hill, he rode along Cemetery Ridge to a position just short of Little Round Top, then back to Culp's Hill and to where the Baltimore Pike crossed Rock Creek. He was accompanied by General Howard, who was the senior commander on the field at the end of the first day, General Hunt, the Chief of Artillery, and Captain Paine, from the engineer staff. As the four men rode, Paine drew a sketch of the ground. Meade then indicated on the sketch the position each corps was to occupy. A tracing of the sketch was then sent to each corps commander.(18)

This initial reconnaissance was completed by seven o'clock. Meade spent the remainder of the morning personally, and through his staff, checking the progress of the occupation and giving additional guidance when necessary. Hunt was sent to verify the artillery positions and Butterfield, the Chief of Staff, was told to familiarize himself with roads to the rear of the position for contingency purposes. By mid morning Meade was sufficiently satisfied with the progress that he established himself in his centrally located headquarters and monitored the situation from there, occasionally riding out for a personal look.

The only significant problem surfaced when one of Meade's staff, Captain Meade, reported that General Sickles had not yet positioned his corps in the correct place and seemed to be unaware of where he should be. General Meade sent additional guidance to Sickles which he thought would clarify any misunderstanding.(19) At eleven o'clock Sickles arrived at Army Headquarters where he again questioned the positioning of his corps. This time Meade personally told Sickles where he should place his line. As events later proved, either Sickles still failed to understand where Meade wanted him or else he elected to follow his own judgement rather than Meade's. It is difficult to see how he could fail to understand considering the messages from Meade and the tracing that was distributed to all corps commanders. Sickles was seriously wounded later in the day and therefore wrote no after action report which might have shed light on the matter.

Meade's one failure in his preparations, insuring Sickles was properly positioned, must be viewed in light of the fact that Meade had been in command for only four days and had no reason to suspect Sickles might present a problem. It was also a critical time of preparation giving Meade plenty of other things to do besides watching one general. It was only months later during testimony before the congressional committee investigating the conduct of the war that he became convinced Sickles had intentionally disobeyed him.(20)

Meade had held Sickles in low esteem for some time based on Sickles's tendency toward behind-the-scene politicking.(21) However, he had no reason to doubt his tactical skill and probably never considered replacing him at this point. Similarly, he disliked Butterfield for the same reason and felt he had not

served Hooker well. Although he had gone as far as interviewing candidates to replace Butterfield on the 28th, he did not follow through since for all his faults, Butterfield was familiar with running the army and Meade was not. Further, to replace him with the first choice, General Humphreys, would necessitate replacing a division commander on the eve of battle. It appears Meade gave Sickles and Butterfield the benefit of doubt and decided to make do with what he had.

During the interval between sending Captain Meade with instructions for Sickles and Sickles's visit, there was another situation which demanded his attention. This was the report of enemy activity to his right front. Thinking Lee might be preparing an attack in that area, Meade directed Slocum to evaluate the possibility of launching an attack from the right side using the XII, V, and when it arrived, the VI Corps. Brigadier General Warren was sent to assist Slocum by providing a terrain evaluation. Both Slocum and Warren felt an attack was inadvisable at this time; the terrain did not favor it and Slocum's position was strong enough to hold if Lee did attack. Additionally, the VI Corps had not arrived yet. Plans for an offensive on the right were therefore shelved at least temporarily by Meade (22).

By three p.m. Meade probably thought his preparations were nearly complete; VI Corps was arriving and he had just met with his corps commanders to discuss the situation and his intentions. Meade sent the following dispatch to Halleck:

I have concentrated my army at this place today. The Sixth Corps is just coming in, very much worn out, having been marching since 9 p.m. last night. The army is fatigued. I have to-day, up to this hour, awaited the attack of the enemy, I have a strong position for defensive. I am not determined, as yet, on attacking him until his position is more developed. He has been moving on both my flanks, apparently, but it is difficult to tell exactly his movements. I have delayed attacking, to allow the Sixth Corps and parts of other corps to reach this place and to rest the men. Expecting a battle, I ordered all my trains to the rear. If not attacked, and I can get any positive information of the position of the enemy which will justify me doing so, I shall attack. If I find it hazardous to do so, or am satisfied the enemy is endeavoring to move to my rear and interpose between me and Washington, I shall fall back to my supplies at Westminister....(23)

In addition to fully informing Halleck of his situation this dispatch indicates that Meade, in the midst of preparing for battle and facing the enemy at close range, had not lost sight of his primary mission of staying between Lee and Washington. He had not allowed himself to be so caught up in the detail of position improvement that he could not view the situation from a higher perspective.

Sometime after despatching this message, he was informed by Warren that Sickles was not in the proper position. Concurrently with this word was heard the sound of rifle and cannon fire from the left. Meade immediately directed General Sykes, who had by

good fortune happened to remain at the headquarters after the commander's meeting, to move his V Corps to the left quickly and to meet Meade there for specific positioning instructions.(24)

This was the first of three significant shifts in forces Meade made during the second and third days of the battle. Examination of which forces were moved, where they were sent, what information was available upon which to make a decision, and when the decision was made are key to evaluating Meade's generalship.

In this case Meade had several important facts readily at hand. He had just been told III Corps was out of position, a fact he probably felt unnecessary to confirm since he had growing cause to doubt Sickles throughout the day. He heard the sounds of artillery fire on his left where Sickles should have been. The V Corps was in reserve and its commander at hand. Finally, his right wing had been reported as prepared to withstand an assault from that side. The only question remaining was when to send help -- immediately or after riding out to see what was happening. Meade sent it immediately; perhaps as a precaution or more likely because he did not know how far out of line Sickles was and therefore if an attack would break his left.

Whether or not that was actually Meade's logic, his action was soon justified. He found the situation worse than anticipated.

On passing the left of the Second Corps, General Meade, although prepared by the report of General Warren to find the Third Corps out of position, was wholly unprepared to find it advanced far beyond any possible construction of its being on the prolongation of the line of the Second Corps. Its lines were over half a mile to the front, to the Emmittsburg Road, entirely disconnected with the rest of the army, and beyond supporting distance.(25)

As the battle, Longstreet's attack, grew in intensity, Meade remained in the area immediately behind Sickles's corps. From this position he could best monitor and influence the flow of troops into the battle. When Longstreet's assault on the left began to show signs of success, Meade sent aides to hurry the arrival of V Corps and he ordered VI Corps to move from the right to the left side of the line.

Moving VI Corps seriously weakened the right, especially since there was no longer an uncommitted reserve, but this was a necessary risk considering the probable collapse of III Corps at any moment. This decision was made by Meade himself and belies criticism of his being overly cautious.

Recognizing Little Round Top as vital to defense of this end of the line, Meade sent Warren to the hill with instructions to "see what troops, if any, were there, and to take every measure necessary for its proper defense."(26) This is the type of command Meade liked to give. It was simple, clear and provided the receiver with ample latitude to achieve the mission as he saw fit. But such orders are only effective when issued to competent officers with initiative and who understand the commander's objectives. Warren was such a man; Sickles was not. Given that Meade was new in command and thus not familiar with all of his commanders, he might have avoided the problem with Sickles, and to a lesser degree, later, with Sedgwick, had he been more directive and watched their actions more closely. On the other hand, that

would have held back the others -- Reynolds, Hancock, Warren and Hunt.

When Warren reported back that the hill was manned only by a signal team, that he could see the Confederates about to advance beyond the left flank of the line and that the hill was key to holding Cemetery Ridge, Meade once again made a rapid decision. Fearing that V Corps would not arrive in time, he ordered Brigadier General Humphreys, 2d Division, III Corps, who was leading his unit forward past Meade, to turn and take Little Round Top. Prior to Humphreys reaching the hill, Meade received word that elements of V Corps had arrived and secured Little Round Top. Meade therefore reversed Humphreys and let him continue to his original objective.

The significance of this is not in the double flanking movement conducted by the 2d Division nor in any delay which may have resulted from their turn toward Little Round Top. What should be taken from this is the fact that Meade was again just where he needed to be to influence the action at a critical point. He weighed the risks of two actions and made a decision. That the decision in this case turned out to be unnecessary is unimportant; Meade did not know that it was moot when he made it.

Meade remained in this sector of the battlefield almost continuously while Longstreet attacked. He positioned reinforcements, sometimes leading them personally to their place in the line. He used his accompanying staff and aides to send messages and to get information. When Sickles fell wounded, Meade once again turned to Hancock for assistance, placing him in command of both II and III Corps.

As the battle on the left of the line wore down, a new one began on the right. This battle is often over-looked because it happened between the two more infamous and romanticized charges of Longstreet and Pickett. It is, however, another significant phase in the events of those fateful days.

As mentioned earlier, the right end of the Federal position was severely weakened in order to send reinforcements to save the left. The army's reserve, V Corps, had been committed on the right initially, followed by VI Corps. When things appeared to be going badly, additional reinforcements were sent from XII Corps leaving basically one brigade to hold the right wing at Culp's Hill.

Lee intended to have simultaneous attacks on both ends of the Federal line but it failed to happen -- fortunately for Meade. The second attack, had it occurred on schedule, might have prevented Meade from drawing sufficient reinforcements to save his left. Because the second attack was launched at sundown, about seven-thirty p.m., the left of the line was sufficiently secure to allow Federal forces to be shifted to meet the new threat.

Once again it was the sound of firing which indicated a new crisis. This time, however, it was Hancock who acted without delay and ordered troops toward the fire. He did it without consulting Meade and in doing so may have saved the day. Meade also was alerted by the noise of firing on the right. He received word from Howard that reinforcements were required and immediately ordered General Newton, who Meade had sent to replace Doubleday as I Corps Commander earlier, to send a division back to the cemetery. With these reinforcements, and ones from XI Corps on Cemetery Hill, the Federal forces were able to retain control of Culp's Hill even though the enemy gained some trenches on the right which had been vacated earlier by units going to aid Sickles. When Meade arrived on the scene he established himself on McKnight's Hill to play much the same role he had at the other end of the line.



Comparison of this shift of forces to the previous one shows some similarities and a few differences. The basic facts available at the time were simple enough. The battle on the left appeared to be over and it was unlikely Longstreet could repeat it any time soon. There was a fight beginning on the right and although it was a naturally strong position with additional fortifications, it had been denuded of troops in order to save Sickles. Howard said reinforcements would be required. Reinforcements should logically be taken from the left where they were no longer needed. Although these troops were battered by previous action, it was better to move them than shift others from the center since the size of the attack was as yet undetermined and might spill over onto the center sector.

Hancock's action should be viewed as another positive aspect of Meade's leadership. Meade encouraged initiative and evidently established a command climate which supported independent action by those choosing to exercise it. Hancock must surely have appreciated the fact that Meade had faith in him since this was the second time he had been intrusted with command of the left wing of the Army of the Potomac.

Once the second battle of the day had died out, Meade assembled his corps commanders for consultation. At nine p.m. they each gave their account of the day's events and the condition of their commands. Meade then did something for which he later was widely criticized; he posed three questions which he asked each commander to answer. This "vote" on what course of action should be taken was interpreted as indecision on his part. The questions asked by Meade were:

1. Under existing circumstances, is it advisable for this army to remain in its present position, or to retire to another nearer its base of supplies?

2. It being determined to remain in present position, shall the army attack or wait the attack of the enemy?

3. If we wait attack, how long?(27)

There were sound reasons for Meade's many consultations with his commanders. He told the congressional committee that, "...they were probably more numerous and more constant in my case, from the fact that I had just assumed command of the army, and felt that it was due to myself to have the opinion of high officers before I took action on matters which involved such momentous issues."(28) No doubt these meetings also gave Meade a good feel for how his commanders were holding up under the stress of combat.

Another benefit was that by having each commander report his status and give his opinions in front of the others, Meade insured that everyone was fully aware of the day's events and the outlook for tomorrow. He was sensitive to the importance of this as a corps commander and had written to his wife, "I hear nothing whatever from headquarters, and am as much in the dark as to proposed plans here on the ground as you are in Philadelphia."(29)

He would not do to others as Hooker had done to him.

After the meeting Meade paused to talk with Gibbon:

General Meade said: "Gibbon, if Lee attacks me to-morrow it will be on your front." Gibbon expressed surprise and asked why he thought so. "Because," replied General Meade, "he has tried my left and failed, and has tried my



right and failed; now, if he concludes to try it again, he will try the centre, right on your front."(30)

This proved prophetic.

Meade spent the morning of 3 July on the right while a battle was fought to regain the trenches lost the previous day. He assisted his corps commanders by adjusting and strengthening positions.(31)

Again thinking beyond the immediate battle, he despatched instructions to other commanders strategically placed to be able to influence events following the battle currently being fought. To General French at Frederick City who commanded the 7000 men of the Harper's Ferry garrison:

The enemy attacked us vigorously yesterday and was repulsed on all sides. The conflict apparently renewed to-day and we have retained our position. Should the result of to-day's operation cause the enemy to fall back towards the Potomac...you will reoccupy Harper's Ferry and annoy and harrass him in his retreat. It may be possible for you now to...cut his communication....If the result of to-day's operation should be our...withdrawal you will look to Washington and throw your force there for its protection. You will be prepared for either of these contingencies should they arise.(32)

The primary mission of screening Washington had not been lost in the fog of battle.

To General Couch who commanded the 11,500 men of the Department of the Susquehanna at Harrisburg:

The sound of my guns for these three days, it is taken for granted is all the additional order or notice you need to come on. Should the enemy withdraw, by prompt co-operation we might destroy him. Should he overpower me, your return and defence of Harrisburg and the Susquehanna is not at all endangered.(33)

By mid morning the Confederate preparations for an attack on the center were visible. Their artillery being massed in front of the center confirmed Meade's prediction of the previous evening. Hunt began repositioning his artillery and issued instructions on counter-fire. Meade discussed the possibility of using V and VI Corps to counter-attack on the left with Hancock. Meade rode down the line stopping to talk with each corps commander. Then he rode to Little Round Top from where the enemy's troop and artillery positions were clear. He then returned to his headquarters.(34)

At about one o'clock the enemy commenced a heavy artillery bombardment on the center of the Federal line. Shot going over Cemetery Ridge fell on the low ground to the rear where Army Headquarters was located, eventually forcing its evacuation to Slocum's headquarters on Power's Hill.

Having expected an attack since the previous evening, seen where the enemy was massing formations, and now seeing where the cannonade was falling, there was no doubt of where Lee was going to assault. Orders were sent to corps on both flanks to thin their lines as much as possible and send what brigades they could spare to the center. Rather than feed these directly into the line, they were held in reserve and, as much as possible, out of the fall of artillery.

The artillery fire finally lifted and Pickett began his infamous charge at about 3 p.m. just as Meade was positioning himself at the focal point, in this case on the crest of Cemetery Hill amongst the artillery.(35)

The attack was repelled with great losses on both sides, including Hancock who was severely wounded. The Battle of Gettysburg was finally over although neither side was sure of this for another twentyfour hours. Meade had defeated the South's best general by thorough and careful preparation, personal leadership and, of course, luck.

Repelling the final assault in some ways was perhaps the easiest of the three Meade had to deal with. He had suspected where the final assault would be aimed the night before as he indicated to Gibbon. The high ground of the Federal position enabled him to see the where Lee was massing his formations and the artillery concentration showed the exact point of the enemy effort. He strengthened the center by thinning the flanks and wisely held the reinforcements out of the line until the cannonade ceased. And of course he was again ably supported by the initiative of his key generals, Hancock and Hunt.

Meade soaked up the sweetness of victory riding in front of the line from Ziegler's Grove to Little Round Top to the cheers of his army. In what could have been a spontaneous salute from the vanquished, the Confederates, although still within range did not fire a shot.

## THE FIRST FEDERAL ATTACK

Meade rode down Cemetery Ridge to Little Round Top not for the sake of receiving the cheers of his victorious army, but to order V and VI Corps to attack.(36) This was to be his first offensive operation as commander of the army and was doomed to failure from the beginning. He explained his actions nine months later in testimony before the congressional committee investigating the conduct of the war:

As soon as the assault was repulsed, I went immediately to the extreme left of my line, with the determination of advancing the left, and making an assault upon the enemy's lines. So soon as I arrived at the left I gave the necessary orders for the pickets and skirmishers in front to be thrown forward to feel the enemy, and for all preparations to be made for the assault. The great length of the line, and the time required to carry these orders out to the front, and the move subsequently made, before the report given to me of the condition of the forces in the front and left, caused it to be so late in the evening as to induce me to abandon the assault which I had contemplated.(37)

The committee did not accept this as a full explanation. Angered and disappointed that Lee had not suffered final defeat at Gettysburg, they determined that Meade had failed to act forcefully when opportunity arose and had thereby allowed Lee to escape thus prolonging the war. Testimony by Butterfield discredited Meade and portrayed him as hesitant and planning to withdraw from the start.(38) Although Butterfield's accusations do not stand up under scrutiny, they were accepted by those looking for a scape-goat. In spite of evidence to the contrary, the committee arrived at the following conclusion:

At the conclusion of the battle on Friday, our troops were in good condition, in the best of spirits, and anxious to be led against the enemy. The three days of battle had been for the most of them comparatively days of rest, and though we lost heavily, our loss had not been so great as that of the enemy, while the morale of our troops was far better.(39)

It is interesting to speculate on the outcome had the attack been allowed to continue. Possibly V and VI Corps could have turned the Confederate right but it would not have been as easy as the committee suggested for they had overlooked a number of key facts in their rush to condemn Meade.

The Army of the Potomac had made a remarkable forced march into the battle with some corps covering as much as thirty miles in twentyfour hours. They had arrived near exhaustion and

immediately been thrown into battle. The periods of "rest" between assaults were occupied building fortifications, moving supplies and all the sundry activities an army at war must do to survive. No doubt they grabbed some sleep when they could but many, especially the officers, went for days without a full night's rest. Each enemy attack necessitated the hurried shift of units within the Federal lines, a distance of over a mile in some cases.

It is also unlikely that units suffering the casualties these did could come out of it in the best of spirits. Today we consider a unit having suffered twenty percent casualties as only marginally combat effective. Many brigades at Gettysburg were left at half strength by the end of the third day. Cheering Meade as he rode by on the way to Little Round Top is not the same as being anxious to be led into battle -- a point that seems to have eluded the Thirty-Eighth Congress. More likely, they were cheering their good fortune to be still alive at the end of the three days.

Finally, there was no way for the committee to have compared the morale of the Union and Confederate Armies, especially at the time of the hearings, while the war was still going on, nor to say that Lee had suffered greater losses than Meade. In fact, neither army was in particularly good shape at the end of the third day and Lee's troops, although defeated, remained a formidable force.

Whether or not an attack on Lee's right could have been successful is arguable, but the fact that this one was not lies clearly on Meade's shoulders. For the first time since assuming command of the Army of the Potomac, he failed to prepare thoroughly for a possible course of action. Although he had considered the attack using V and VI Corps earlier in the day and had discussed the matter with Hancock, he did not warn the corps commanders to prepare for such an eventuality nor designate a commander of the attacking force. It is conceivable that he had Hancock in mind for that position but Hancock said nothing at the time or later to support that idea. The corps commanders, Sykes and Sedgwick, knew nothing of the attack until Meade rode to Little Round Top and ordered an immediate advance.(40)

Without prior notice of the mission, V and VI Corps had positioned their brigades in such a way as to make launching a rapid large scale attack difficult if not impossible. Of the sixteen brigades in the designated attack force, six were positioned behind the Round Tops and Cemetery Ridge, one being on the right end of the Union line. Of the ten on the left of the line, two were behind and east of Big Round Top and one near the Peach Orchard. To further complicate matters the brigades of the two corps were intermixed. Finally, those brigades which had engaged Longstreet that afternoon had suffered casualties as well as being tired and in need of resupply.

All of this, combined with the delay resulting from Meade riding to delivering the order in person and the onset of darkness, left little choice but to abort the attack. If he deserves no other credit for this phase of the battle, Meade at least showed good judgement in countermanding his order before any disaster befell the operation.

This episode seems out of character for Meade. Although he never offered further justification for his actions, several possibilities exist. For one thing, he was tired and this may have degraded his thought process to some degree. In a letter to his wife five days later he states, "From the time I took command till to-day, now over ten days, I have not changed my clothes, have not had a regular night's rest, and many nights not a wink of sleep, and for several days did not even wash my face and hands,

no regular food, and all the time in a great state of mental anxiety."(41)

Perhaps sometime after his discussion with Hancock he decided the attack to be improbable and therefore issued no warning order. Then a combination of events may have caused him to change his mind at the last minute. Hancock, severely wounded, sent a note to Meade before being carried off the field. The note urged Meade to attack immediately with V and VI Corps in order to take advantage of the retreating enemy.(42) Meade may suddenly have seen this as the opportunity to finally go on the offensive. Doing so would offer another advantage beyond doing damage to the enemy; it would eliminate the possibility of the criticism he and others made of Hooker, that he hesitated to attack, would be leveled at him.(43)

Whatever his reasons for launching the attack, the fact that he stopped it before a decisive encounter with the enemy was additional ammunition for his critics. The contingency plan to withdraw to Pipe Creek, his instructions to Butterfield to examine routes to the rear and his failure to decisively destroy the Confederates at Gettysburg were evidence in a growing case against him in Washington.

## THE PURSUIT OF LEE

The evening of 3 July held promise of being the first full night's sleep for Meade since assuming command. He had moved to a field just south of the farm house which had once been his headquarters and was now serving as a hospital. He and his staff slept in the open. Although unsure of Lee's intentions, to withdraw or wait on Seminary Ridge for an attack, Meade was confident he would make no further attacks on the Federal position. During the night a hard rain began which lasted throughout the following day.(44)

At first light it was reported that the Confederate forces were no longer visible in the town of Gettysburg or in front of the Federal right. Meade was uncertain of the meaning of this. The withdrawal of forces during the night could be the beginning of a general retreat or merely a repositioning to better defensive positions on Seminary Ridge. Seeking clarification of the enemy's location and intent, Meade ordered Slocum to advance the right wing and Howard to move his corps off Cemetery Hill into the town. In the event that this was a withdrawal, he sent a message to French at Frederick City instructing him to seize the South Mountain passes.(45)

By mid-morning Slocum and Howard completed their missions and reported that Lee was not retreating. He had moved his left wing back onto Seminary Ridge so that the two armies now faced one another from roughly parallel lines rather than the previous semi-encirclement. Based on this information a message was sent to French at 10.20 a.m. revoking the order to seize the South Mountain passes.

More recent developments indicate that the enemy may have retired to take a new position and await an attack from us. The General countermands his despatch requiring you to re-occupy Maryland Heights and seize the South Mountain passes, resuming the instructions contained in the despatch of July 3rd, making your movements contingent upon those of the enemy.(46)

It is evident from this dispatch that he now considered the Army of the Potomac to be on the offensive. But he did not wish to attack on Lee's terms; on ground of the enemy's choice which he had ample time to prepare. He wrote to his wife, "They waited one day expecting that, flushed with success, I would attack them, when they would play their old game of shooting us from behind breastworks...."(47) He gave the commanders guidance for the remainder of the day by means of a circular.

Corps Commanders will report the present position of the troops under their command in the immediate front -- location, etc., amount of supplies on hand and condition. The intention of the Major General Commanding is not to make any present move, but to refit and rest for the day. The opportunity must be made use of to get the commands well in hand,



and ready for such duties as the General may direct....(48)

Meade had informed Halleck at seven in the morning of the over-night disappearance of enemy forces to his right. At noon he updated Halleck with the following:

The position of affairs is not materially changed from my last despatch, 7 a.m. The enemy has apparently thrown back his left, and placed guns and troops in position in rear of Gettysburg, which we now hold. The enemy has abandoned large numbers of his killed and wounded on the field. I shall require some time to get up supplies, ammunition, &c., rest the army, worn out by long marches and three days' hard fighting. I shall probably be able to give you a return of our captures and losses before night, and return of the enemy's killed and wounded in our hands.(49)

Based on the facts known to or suspected by Meade, his decision to delay an attack was wise. The need to reorganize, refit and rest his army, was sound. There was also the rain which came down "so violently as to interrupt any very active operations if I had designed making them."(50) But there were other factors which, although unstated, were just as important.

Prior to the engagement at Gettysburg, the Army of Virginia was thought to equal or surpass the Army of the Potomac in strength. And while it required only a look at the bloody fields in front of the appropriately named Cemetery Ridge to see that Lee's army had suffered great losses, so had the Union forces. Counting enemy casualties and prisoners would take at least the rest of the day and would be of little real use without knowing Lee's beginning strength.

No doubt Meade also recognised the advantage gained fighting from a strong defensive position. After all, he had just defeated the heretofore invincible Lee and his southern juggernaut by forcing him into attacking a strong defense -- just as he thought Lee was now attempting to lure him into doing.

Finally, considering the extended and vulnerable Confederate lines of communication, Meade doubted that Lee would risk waiting more than one day in his present position before beginning his withdrawal.(51)

The only risk Meade assumed by delaying was one he may not have considered; he was providing another instance which his political enemies would cite as proof of his unwillingness to attack Lee.

The two armies spent the day accross the field from one another in the pouring rain, each waiting for the other to make a move. While the soldiers tended to the details of burying the dead and gathering ammunition from casualties, Meade developed his plan for the pursuit of Lee. He sent a cavalry force to South Mountain in anticipation of paralleling the enemy's move as he had done before. If the cavalry and the forces of French could secure the passes through South Mountain, he could hit the enemy on the flank as they retreated. He did not plan on following the rebels to Chambersburg since those passes could be effectively blocked by a small rear guard. A reconnaissance on the left side of the line

was ordered for the next morning under the command of Warren and to be supported by VI Corps.(52)

At first light on 5 July, Warren advanced to the Emmettsburg Pike and found the enemy had once again withdrawn under cover of darkness. At the same time, reports from signal stations began arriving at army headquarters indicating the enemy was no longer occupying their main defensive lines. The only force evident to the stations was a large formation in the west. Scouts, hurried forward from all parts of the line, confirmed the enemy had withdrawn.

Satisfied that the enemy was withdrawing, but uncertain of how far, Meade moved to both gain information and maintain pressure. Cavalry was sent to follow the retreating forces on the Cashtown Road and Sedgewick, whose VI Corps was selected for this mission because it "...had been comparatively unengaged during the battle, and was in full force and strength..."(53), was to advance on the Fairfield Road under the following orders:

All information I can obtain proves withdrawal of enemy through Cashtown and Fairfield Road. Push forward your column in W. direction; find out his force; if rear guard it will be compelled to retire; if not you'll find out. Time is of great importance, as I can't give orders for a movement without explicit information from you. General Sykes will cover your withdrawal if necessary, and General Warren, who carries this, will read it to General Sykes.(54)

This order is typical of Meade at his best. A brief mission type order explaining what needs to be done, the importance of the mission, and allowing the recipient a high degree of flexibility -- in this case, the flexibility of withdrawing should the need arise. The necessary coordination was explicit; Meade's dependable engineer, Warren, would personally read the order to Sykes and deliver it to Sedgewick.

The movement of the army referred to in the orders had already been planned. A movement order had been prepared but was not to be issued until Sedgewick confirmed the enemy withdrawal to be toward the Potomac and not just to Chambersburg. The order contained the following instructions:

For the movement, and until the concentration at Middletown, General Sedgewick will, without relinquishing command of his Corps, assume command and direct the movements of the corps forming the right -- 1st, 6th, and 3rd.

General Slocum will, without relinquishing command of his Corps, assume command and direct the movements of the corps forming the left, 12th and 2nd.

General Howard will, without relinquishing command of his Corps, assume command and direct movements of the corps forming the centre, 5th and 11th.(55)

The thrust of Meade's plan was contained in a message to

Halleck despatched that afternoon. It said, in part, that, "All my available Cavalry are in pursuit on the enemy's left and rear. My movement will be made at once on his flank via Middletown and South Mountain Pass." (56)

Sedgewick, following Lee's rear guard, sent word to Meade that information had been obtained indicating the enemy main body was near Fairfield and that a major engagement could develop in that vicinity. As a precaution, Meade ordered III and V Corps to move toward VI Corps in order to provide support should the need arise. While in the process of issuing these orders, Meade discovered that Butterfield had, upon his own authority, issued the previously prepared movement order for the entire army. (57) Staff officers were immediately sent to stop I and III Corps and to have them be prepared to come to the aid of Sedgewick. The others were allowed to continue since they would not go much farther that day.

Although no damage resulted from Butterfield's premature action, Meade may well have kicked himself mentally for not following through with his initial desire to replace Butterfield the day he assumed command. The order appears to have been prepared just as Meade said it was intended, to be issued at a time as yet unknown. Unlike the order for the move to Gettysburg, the date and time for each unit are conspicuously absent in this order. Perhaps Butterfield assumed Meade's words to Halleck, that he would move "at once", meant the order should be published immediately.

Butterfield was relieved sometime that day, the chief of staff functions being performed by Warren and Pleasonton as additional duty until Humphreys assumed the position on the 8th. Characteristically, at least at this stage of his career, Meade kept his reasons to himself. He had not thought highly of Butterfield to begin with and this may have been the final straw. Another justifiable cause for Butterfield's relief was the order to retreat he had drawn up on the second day of the Battle of Gettysburg and shown to several commanders, falsely accusing Meade of being the originator. There is no indication, however, that Meade was aware of this prior to Butterfield's testimony before the congressional committee the following March.

While waiting for the situation at Fairfield to develop, a series of dispatches were exchanged between Meade and Halleck. The result was a tightening of the net around Lee's withdrawing army. French was ordered to Harper's Ferry with reinforcements being sent by Halleck. Meade was given command of Couch's force and advised to bring them to join his right flank. Halleck now felt Washington and Baltimore sufficiently secure to send units from those cities to reinforce Meade's effort. (58)

At 6 p.m. on the 5th, Meade received additional information from Sedgewick. VI Corps had taken Fairfield and information from prisoners indicated the enemy intended to make a stand near there. Meade immediately halted the southward movement of the army and it was held ready to either turn toward Fairfield for another major engagement or to continue the move south to attack Lee before he crossed the Potomac.

It was surely a tense time for Meade. He had to judge the enemy's intent based on bits of information received from different sources, the sum of which was far from complete. Should he mis-read it, the result could be disastrous. If he moved his force to Fairfield anticipating engagement there, and the report of a stand was false, Lee would gain at least one day's head start on his river crossing. On the other hand, if Meade continued to the Potomac and Lee halted near Fairfield, Washington and Baltimore would be uncovered. At this point others may have

forgotten Meade's primary mission, but he had not. Protecting the capital took priority over destroying the Army of Virginia. Thus he decided to minimize risk by halting in place until the enemy's intent became clearer.

To be successful, Meade needed timely information. Any delay in ascertaining enemy moves would cost valuable time and place him in the position of following rather than paralleling Lee. In order to develop the situation more rapidly and thus determine what Lee was up to, Meade sent the following guidance to Sedgewick:

After conversation with General Warren, I think under existing circumstances you had better push your reconnoissance so as to ascertain, if practicable, how far the enemy has retreated, and also the character of the Gap, and practicability of carrying the same. In case I should determine to advance on that line, you must be careful to watch your right and rear, as roads from Cashtown all open to the enemy to advance against you. My cavalry sent to Cashtown have not reported, but I have reason to believe that the enemy is there in force. I beg you to keep me fully advised of what occurs, and I desire you will report at least every two or three hours. Both 1st and 3rd Corps are under your orders, and can be called to your support if you need them. I shall not move the army from its present position until I am better satisfied the enemy are evacuating the Cumberland Valley.(59)

Meade tended to rely heavily on generals he trusted and those with experience. He had lost the ones he thought the best, Reynolds and Hancock, and another he did not like but who nonetheless had experience, Sickles. Now he was about to find that one of the current commanders left something to be desired.

He received a wordy communication from Sedgewick at 8.30 a.m. expressing hesitation to press forward against an unknown force and a request for more support to cover him.(60) Meade's frustration is understandable considering Lee was up to who knows what while Sedgewick sat in place. His vexation shows in the reply to the VI Corps Commander:

Your dispatch is received, proposing to move to Emmettsburg. I cannot, at present, approve of the proposition. I advised you last night that you could call to your support Newton and Birney, who are under your orders. Newton reporting to me that he and Birney had moved under your orders on the Emmettsburg Road (and your dispatch that you had not sent orders to them) I immediately directed them to halt, to report their positions to you and await your orders. I have also directed General Howard (who commands 5th and 11th Corps) to post one of his Corps at Emmettsburg, and the other on some road leading from Fairfield from whence it can be thrown up there. With this disposition of three Corps under your immediate command, and two within

support together with the fact just reported that our Cavalry have passed through Cashtown without opposition, and were at Caledonia Iron Works (N.W. from Fairfield some 11 miles) I am of the opinion that you are in a measure secure on your right flank and rear and therefore can examine the front.

All evidence seems to show a movement to Hagerstown and the Potomac. No doubt the principal force is between Fairfield and Hagerstown; but I apprehend they will be likely to let you alone, if you let them alone. Let me know the result of Neill's operations -- whether they retire before him, or threaten to push him and you. Send out picketts well on your left flank; reconnoiter in all directions, and let me know the result.

This is all the instruction I can give you. Whenever I am satisfied that the main body is retiring from the mountains, I shall continue my flank movement.

I am going to direct Couch to move down the Cumberland Valley to threaten their rear.(61)

With that painfully explicit guidance, Sedgewick pressed on through Fairfield Pass and reported back at 2 p.m. on the 6th that he was faced by one division and an artillery battery which he felt would withdraw as soon as the enemy trains had passed. With this information in hand, Meade reinstated the previous order to move to Middletown. He elected to go this way since the division holding the Gap at Fairfield could cause undue delays.

On the morning of the 7th, the Union army set out for Middletown. Covering remarkable distances, in some cases as much as thirtyfour miles, most of the corps closed on Middleburg by 11.30 p.m.(19) The day gained by this fast pace was taken up squeezing the army through the narrow passes into the Cumberland Valley. Now, on 9 July, having speedily moved his army into close proximity of the enemy, his major problem was how to maneuver to a favorable attack position.

He knew the next battle would not be easy, for in addition to numerous changes in key command and staff positions, he was faced with the loss of many experienced soldiers. The term of enlistment for a large number of volunteers was rapidly expiring. Although replacements were provided from various garrisons, they were not battle-seasoned troops and their performance was therefore suspect.

Possibly it was these two factors, doubts about new commanders and the quality of the new replacements, that caused Meade to become cautious -- perhaps overly cautious. A combination of Meade's actions and weather had trapped Lee on the north side of the Potomac. The heavy rains had raised the river to the point that it could not be forded and forces under French had destroyed the pontoon bridge at Williamsport prior to Lee's return. Now the Army of the Potomac was gradually closing on him. But the Union forces maneuvered forward so slowly that Lee had time to prepare strong defenses. A flatboat plied back and forth at Williamsport taking wounded south and returning with ammunition and supplies. Three days passed while Lee's defense grew and Meade eased closer. Concurrently, the water level began to fall.

As various reports came into headquarters describing Lee's preparations to receive him, Meade realized time was working against him. On 12 July he informed Halleck, "It is my intention to attack them to-morrow, unless something intervenes to prevent



it, for the reason that delay will strengthen the enemy and will not increase my force."(63)

That evening Meade consulted with his commanders who persuaded him to cancel the attack. He rode forward the next morning with his chief of staff, Humphreys, to see for himself the state of Confederate preparations. He then issued a new order to attack the following morning.

In an up-date to Halleck, Meade explained why he had not attacked that morning:

...Upon calling my corps commanders together and submitting the question to them, five out of six were unqualifiedly opposed to it. Under these circumstances, in view of the momentous consequence attendant upon failure to succeed, I did not feel myself authorized to attack until after I had made a more careful examination of the enemy's position, strength, and defensive works....(64)

Needless to say, Halleck was not pleased. He fired back the following stinging reply:

...You are strong enough to attack and defeat the enemy before he can effect a crossing. Act upon your own judgment and make your generals execute your orders. Call no council of war. It is proverbial that councils of war never fight. Re-enforcements are pushed on as rapidly as possible. Do not let the enemy escape.(65)

When the army advanced the next morning they found, once more, that the enemy had slipped away in the dark of night. The Army of Virginia had crossed the Potomac and the Gettysburg Campaign was over.

Meade was widely and harshly criticised for having lost the opportunity to end the war on the spot by crushing Lee. But considering the enemy's strength and the defenses around Williamsport, an attack may well have resulted in the disaster Meade had feared. Contrary to Halleck's statement, the Army of the Potomac was not strong enough to defeat Lee under those conditions. What they had in raw numbers was offset by low quality. While the Secretary of War referred to them as a "fine army", a Union commandersaid the replacements were "quite helpless" and an "incoherent mass."(66) To have thrown this force against an experienced enemy in prepared defenses would have been folly.

It is possible that the odds would have been better if Meade had rushed to attack three days earlier thus giving the enemy less time to prepare. But that would have been a high-risk venture possibly resulting in a Federal defeat and the uncovering of Washington. And again, it must be remembered that Meade saw his first duty as the defense of Washington, not the destruction of Lee. It is therefore arguable that his real mistake was announcing to Halleck an attack which he could not execute. It might also have been wise if Meade had reminded Halleck at various times during the campaign of his original orders stressing defense



of the capitol above all else.

Meade waged an admirable and successful campaign, handing Lee his first military defeat and the Confederacy their first strategic defeat. But in the process he paid the ultimate price -- he lost his reputation.

## SUMMARY

Analysis of Meade's generalship during the Gettysburg campaign shows him to have been a highly capable commander who did a superb job under trying conditions. Although not beyond making mistakes, as the hasty attack on the evening of 3 July proved, this was not the norm. As a rule he ran the campaign as well as could have been done given the circumstances. Meade's handling of the Army of the Potomac could serve as a text book example of the operational level of war. He never allowed himself to be drawn into the immediate battle to the point of losing sight of the operational objective. He never forgot that his mission was to shield the capital, not the destruction of Lee's army.

Meade concentrated on maneuvering his army to the battle and left tactics to corps and division commanders. That is a remarkable feat in itself considering that he had been a corps commander himself only three days before the battle. For some unknown reason, but much to his credit, he made the transition instantly from the tactical to the operational level when he assumed command of the army.

One possible reason for the ease of his transition was his leadership style. He placed a great deal of responsibility on subordinates, allowing them to make key decisions rather than tying himself down and thus becoming a bottle-neck. Complementing this was his preference for issuing mission type orders. Of course this style of leadership is only successful when the commander is blessed with subordinates possessing initiative, intelligence and a thorough understanding of the commander's intent. When Meade assumed command he was fortunate in having men like Reynolds, Hancock and Warren. But as a number of these fell casualty, along with others who were not as good but were at least experienced, Meade had difficulty finding reliable replacements. He overcame this to some degree by becoming more explicit in his orders. It is doubtful that Hancock and Reynolds would have significantly changed the outcome of the campaign had they not fallen, but their presence would have at least given Meade some confidence.

Above all else, Meade was cautious and thorough. Caution, however, is a double edged sword and can, if carried too far, lead to lost opportunity. Perhaps Meade was too cautious as his critics said. But before rushing to judgment it must be remembered how new he was to the command, the dearth of information available to him, and the consequences of any mistake which would free Lee to move on Washington. Later Union commanders who were more bold were successful in part because the risks in failing were smaller. Most criticism of his caution is made with after-the-fact knowledge unavailable to Meade at the time he was faced with making a choice.

His thoroughness is evident in the precise and well planned movement of the army, coordination of supporting forces of French and Couch, and in the information flow within the Army of the Potomac; the latter by means of circulars and meetings with commanders.

These meetings, or consultations, became another point of criticism but were actually a very good way of accomplishing what Meade wanted. They kept him informed and, in turn, kept his commanders up to date.

The final attribute that helped him to be successful was his ability to always be where he could influence the situation. He was centrally located during movement and at the focal point of

every battle. While this meant he was frequently absent from his headquarters, his wise use of wing commanders reduced his span of control and the need for him to oversee all parts of the operation simultaneously.

In the final analysis, Meade was the kind of leader that we look for today. Knowledgeable, thorough, decentralized and with a natural gift for the operational level of war. And most important of all, he was a winner. His short-coming was the one that afflicts so many great generals; although he mastered the military arts he failed on the political battlefield.

## END NOTES

### LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CCW, Report -- U.S. Congress, "Report of the Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War, Thirty-Eighth Congress."

OR -- "The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies."

L&L -- Meade, George, "The Life and Letters of General George Gordon Meade."

1. L&L, vol.2, p.1.
2. Ibid., p.2.
3. Eisenhower, "At Ease," p.51.
4. OR, XXVII, pt.1, p.61.
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